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REVIEWS

THE BRITISH REPORT ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

A most important contribution to the teaching of English has recently come in the report of a committee appointed by the president of the Board of Education to inquire into the position of English in the educational system of England.¹

First of all, the report makes amply clear that a right idea of education is essential to understanding the position of English and its best inculcation. It emphasizes that a true education must be the same in its beginnings for all classes of people, and must help to unite and not to separate them. It urges abandoning the past ideas of book-learning, gathering mere words and information, and the "gritting of the teeth upon hard substances" as a means of discipline. A most excellent chapter of historical retrospect shows the various theories of education which have governed in schools, and turns clearly to English, and particularly to English literature, as the only basis for a true Humanism in the common schools of today.

The purposes of education in English are outlined (p. 19) as

(1) Systematic training in the sounded speech of standard English, to secure correct pronunciation and clear articulation; (2) systematic training in the use of standard English, to secure clearness and correctness both in oral expression and in writing; (3) training in reading. Under this last head will be included reading aloud with feeling and expression, the use of books as sources of information and means of study, and finally, the use of literature as we have already described it, that is, as a possession and a source of delight, a personal intimacy in the gaining of personal experience, an end in itself and, at the same time, an equipment for the understanding of life.

The discussion of this last point is particularly admirable throughout the report. Ascham's "Learning teacheth more in one year than experience in twenty" is the key to this account of the place of "good letters." Naturally, all is stressed in the report which bears upon the securing of such fundamental and excellent experience, and everything in the way of obstructive annotations and information-examinations is

¹ *The Teaching of English in England*. Imperial House, Kingsway, London, W.C. 2: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1921. 1s. 6d. net. Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston. \$0.50.

properly rebuked. A number of times we hear that we must "arrive at interest in literature through interest in life"; that we must avoid the "storage theory" by which literature is inculcated to be understood and valued later. This point is well reinforced by a summary of important passages in Wordsworth's "The Prelude" (summarized on pp. 16 and 17; see also the quotation on p. 166).

It is perhaps unfortunate for the progress of this most fundamental idea that the report does not distinguish from this teaching of real literature the gaining command of reading and the acquisition of knowledge, which belong rather under the utilitarian employment than the enjoyment of books. The report rightly stresses silent reading and definite lessons in the use of reference books and libraries. It does not, however, make any reference to the development of comprehension tests—those in which the pupil shows his understanding of matter actually before him—which have grown in so extraordinary a way in this country. By the grouping together of "the use and enjoyment of books," moreover (pp. 82 ff., 84, 88, 105, etc.), a great deal appears to be done to break down the excellent attack which the report organizes against a barren and formal teaching of literature itself. Something very similar to Mr. Hinchman's reading clubs is reported from a number of English schools, but largely as done outside the classrooms, and by way of supererogation rather than as a part of literature itself. The matter of oral reading is rightly seen as a part, beyond the primary grades at least, of the literature rather than the reading courses.

The report rightly urges separating the teaching of practical and utilitarian composition from the teaching of literature. Numerous excellent suggestions about composition work are made—in particular that it is far better to have a problem to be solved, that "the pupil should say something of his own with a given audience and with a given object," than that he should, "*pace* Stevenson," be given a model.¹ It is surprising to see expressed in the report the idea, which one would suppose any teacher could refute by the examples of some of his best students of literature, that "a boy who reads with avidity seldom spells badly. . . . As a result of doing plenty of reading, often between 11 and 14, a boy suddenly begins to spell well!"

The value of the precis is urged (p. 117), and this is differentiated from the paraphrase (p. 139). The value of good informal or colloquial expression is contrasted with the usual inculcation of "ornate verbosity" (p. 132). It is urged that the children's individual expression be

¹ Quoted from Mr. P. J. Hartog, p. 34 of the report.

encouraged rather than corrected; the interesting suggestion is made that *real mistakes* have their source not in but *outside the child*, in community bad habits of speech. Testimony similar to that of many teachers in this country is given on the decline in power of self-expression in children who enter the equivalent of our intermediate grades—called by Professor Elliott “the great educational desert.” Moreover, the value of oral English is strongly urged, and again and again, a scientific approach to the subject through a knowledge of phonetics is insisted upon.

The need of a simple study of the history of the language, scarcely recognized as yet in the high schools of this country, is urgently stated. Some of the best matter in the book comes in the sections upon grammar. The historical sketch of this subject (pp. 283 ff.) is as interesting and valuable as that of Humanism already referred to. The terminology urged is, naturally, that of the nomenclature committee (of course, the British Committee).

The point is made with great emphasis that we need the grammar of structure or function, and not that purporting to teaching how we ought to speak.¹ As to the teaching of correct speech, as distinct from matters of punctuation and sentence structure which grammar most fully and directly deals with, the report urges direct attention to formation of habits. Unfortunately, it makes no use of the psychology of habit formation rather currently understood in this country, but relies “first of all on correction of mistakes when they arise, and secondly, on the great power of imitation.” One wishes that the English Committee had seen fit to stress here the enormous potency of purpose as the initial point in establishing good habits of speech, and the further necessity of attention to fixing a very few essential habits, rather than the random firing all along the line which correction of mistakes when they arise inevitably means. But the insistence on functional grammar, including the elements of phonetics, on having only a few simple lessons and immense quantities of exercise upon these, and the statement of the purpose of grammar for understanding structure and not for correctness, are great reinforcements to the attempts we are making here to get the subject rightly handled.

An admirable chapter of the report discusses the proper preparation of teachers (Chap. VI, pp. 167 ff.). Despite wide differences in terminology and examination systems, the difficulties of the situation seem to

¹ Professor Wyld is quoted in an admirable paragraph upon this subject, and his *Elementary Lessons in English Grammar* cited.

be much the same in both countries, and the recommendations made by the report are of no small value. In particular, we hear the familiar suggestion that the teacher must be able to read and understand what is read; particularly that he must be able to read aloud with intelligence and pleasant effect; and that he must be able to write and to speak English in a coherent and cultivated fashion, which means, of course, an oral examination for those who would qualify. The actual preparation of teachers in education seems to be much like that provided by most of our normal schools and education courses in universities, topped by more or less haphazard "practice teaching." In a few places, apparently, active participation by teachers in the elementary-school and high-school classes, somewhat like that at the University of Wisconsin, seems to have been attempted.

The report provides no bibliography or lists of readings; these would be extremely useful. There is a quite full index. No attempt is made to build courses of study, but merely to lay down the fundamental principles on which such courses should be built; these recommendations are summarized in full. There is no question that English teaching both in England and in this country will owe a tremendous deal to this pronouncement of the British Committee.

Following are some British books on the teaching of English which might well be better known by American teachers:

- E. A. Greening-Lamborn, *The Rudiments of Criticism*. Oxford, 1916.
 ———, *Expression in Speech and Writing*. Oxford, 1922.
 John Adams, *The New Teaching*. Hodder-Stoughton, 1920. (A general chapter and a chapter on the teaching of English by Professor Adams.)
 H. Caldwell Cook, *The Play Way*. Heineman, 1915. Stokes (importation, printed on very bad paper), 1917.
 F. S. Hayward, *The Lesson in Appreciation*. Macmillan, 1915.
 Percy Simpson, *Scenes from Old Play-Books*. Oxford, 1905.
 W. S. Tompkinson, *The Teaching of English*. Oxford, 1921.

Various publications of the English Association, in particular *The Essentials of English Teaching*. Longmans, Green & Co.

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